



# HONDURAS: A PARIAH STATE, OR INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS TO ORGANIZED CRIME DESERVING U.S. SUPPORT?

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R. Evan Ellis





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## FOREWORD

For the U.S. Armed Forces, and militaries throughout the world, non-traditional missions have become an increasingly important part of the range of operations that they are called on to conduct. In the Western Hemisphere, one of the most prominent examples has been the involvement of Central American armed forces in the fight against transnational organized crime groups and violent street gangs such as *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) and *Barrio 18* (B-18). The long-term propriety of employing the military in what is, at its core, a law enforcement role, continues to be a subject of debate not only in Central America, but also throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, and elsewhere in the world. Nonetheless, in the face of the inadequacy of law enforcement institutions to meet the challenge, because of its magnitude, lack of resources, corruption, and other shortcomings in law enforcement institutions, elected leaders across the ideological spectrum in Honduras, as well as neighboring El Salvador and Nicaragua, have consistently assigned their armed forces prominent roles in combating these challenges.

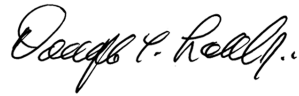
Perhaps the most extreme of such cases has been Honduras, where the military has not only been used to augment law enforcement capabilities, but in which the administration of President Juan Orlando Hernandez has created a new elite police force within the armed forces, the Military Police for Public Order (PMOP), as well as a creative structure for integrating military and police units, prosecutors, special judges, and other government assets within the National Interagency Security Force (FUSINA), under the President and his national security council.

While President Hernandez himself has been the target of national protests over allegations of corruption and abuse of power, the new security structures that he has put in place and their application via *Plan Morazán* have produced significant results, including a reduction in the nation's murder rate from 86.5 per 100,000 in 2011, to 64 per 100,000 by 2014. With help from the United States, Honduras has significantly reduced the use of its national territory as a transit zone by narcotraffickers and has dismantled the leadership of the two most important drug smuggling organizations operating in the region, the *Cachiros* and the *Los Valles*.

The present monograph by Latin America research professor Dr. R. Evan Ellis of the Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) examines the policies and strategies of the Hernandez administration in the fight against organized crime and gangs in Honduras, both with respect to its innovations and achievements, as well as its shortcomings, as a case study of an important mission that armed forces in the region are increasingly called upon to perform. The monograph also provides concrete recommendations for U.S. military leaders and policymakers with respect to effectively engaging with Honduras in the struggle against the shared threats of organized crime and gangs.

This monograph is the latest in an ongoing series of works by SSI to provide strategic-level insight for U.S. military leaders, as well as policymakers and academics, on important security and

defense issues in Latin America and the Caribbean. We hope that you find it stimulating and of interest.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Douglas C. Lovelace, Jr." in a cursive script.

DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.  
Director  
Strategic Studies Institute and  
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

R. EVAN ELLIS is a research professor of Latin American Studies at the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute with a focus on the region's relationships with China and other non-Western Hemisphere actors. Dr. Ellis has presented his work in a broad range of business and government forums in 25 countries. He has given testimony on Chinese activities in Latin America to the U.S. Congress on multiple occasions and has discussed his work regarding China and other external actors in the region on a broad range of radio and television programs, including CNN International, CNN En Español, The John Bachelor Show, Voice of America, and Radio Marti. Dr. Ellis is cited regularly in the print media in both the United States and Latin America for his work in this area. Dr. Ellis has published over 130 works, including *China in Latin America: The Whats and Wherefores* (2009), *The Strategic Dimension of Chinese Engagement with Latin America* (2013), and *China on the Ground in Latin America* (2014). Dr. Ellis holds a Ph.D. in political science with a specialization in comparative politics.



## SUMMARY

The public protests against Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez, which peaked in July 2015, highlighted perceptions of corruption by Hondurans of their President and his government, and fostered a new spirit of civic participation in Central America. Outside the region, less noticed is that President Hernandez has also made significant changes in the strategy and institutions of the country in combating the interrelated scourges of organized crime and violent gangs, which have plagued Honduras as well as its neighbors. That new approach, set forth in the administration's interagency security plan and Operation MORAZÁN, has produced notable successes. With U.S. assistance, the National Interagency Security Force (FUSINA) and the Honduran government dismantled the leadership of the nation's two principal family-based drug smuggling organizations, the *Cachiros* and the *Los Valles*, and significantly reduced the use of the national territory as a drug transit zone, particularly narco flights. Murders in the country have fallen from 86.5 per 100,000 in 2011, to 64 per 100,000 in 2014.

The approach taken by the Hernandez administration to produce these results includes the creation of innovative new structures. These include a new military-led interagency organization, FUSINA, which integrates elements from the armed forces, police, prosecutors, special judges, and other state resources to combat organized crime and delinquency in the country. More controversially, he has created a new police force within the military, the Military Police of Public Order (PMOP), which has been deployed both to provide security to the nation's principal urban areas, Tegucigalpa, Comayagüela, and San Pedro Sula, and

to participate in operations against organized crime groups. In the fight against narcotrafficking, he has advanced a concept of three interdependent “shields”:

1. An **air shield** to better control Honduran airspace, enacted in January 2014, which enables suspected drug flights to be shot-down and the acquisition of three radars from Israel to support intercepts by the Honduran air force;
2. A **maritime shield**, with new naval bases on the country’s eastern coast and new shallow-water and riverine assets for intercepting smugglers; and,
3. A **land shield**, including enhanced control of the border with Guatemala through the “Maya-Chorti Task Force.”

Beyond FUSINA, the Hernandez administration has also sought to reform the nation’s national police, albeit with slow progress. It is also reforming the penitentiary system, dominated by the criminal gangs MS-13 and B-18.

In the implementation of its new approach, the Hernandez administration has also faced a number of difficult challenges. These include persistently high levels of corruption at all levels of government, a substantial presence of organized crime in the private sector, slow police reform, institutional rivalries between government organizations, difficulties with the integration of intelligence capabilities supporting FUSINA, difficulties in combating money laundering, societal concerns regarding human rights violations by the military and other government entities, and the long-term hurdle of a changing culture of gangs, violence and poverty that permeates the country.



This monograph focuses on the evolution of the transnational organized crime and gang challenges in Honduras, the strategies and structures of the Hernandez administration in combating them, associated challenges, and recommendations for the U.S. military and policymakers to support the country in such efforts.



# **HONDURAS: A PARIAH STATE, OR INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS TO ORGANIZED CRIME DESERVING U.S. SUPPORT?**

## **INTRODUCTION**

In July 2015, tens of thousands of Hondurans turned out in the streets of the nation's principal cities, Tegucigalpa, Comayagüela, and San Pedro Sula for recurring weekly protests against the government of President Juan Orlando Hernandez, which many saw as corrupt and going beyond democratic mechanisms to exercise and consolidate its power.<sup>1</sup> Key protest issues included a scandal involving the nation's principal state health organization, the Honduran Institute for Social Security (IHSS), in which government payments for false or substandard medicines may have resulted in the deaths of ill and elderly Hondurans, while part of the illicit gains went to the nation's leading politicians, including the President's own electoral campaign.<sup>2</sup> For many, however, the last straw was the April 2015 ruling by Honduras' Supreme Court to overturn the nation's constitutional prohibition of re-election.<sup>3</sup> Many in the country saw the decision as orchestrated by President Hernandez to sustain himself in power. This decision was viewed by many as being related to other actions by Hernandez that some in Honduras found questionable, such as when he, as head of Congress, played a key role in the removal of four Supreme Court justices supporting ex-President Manuel Zelaya.<sup>4</sup>

While the allegations of corruption and abuse of power by opponents of President Hernandez are serious, they also contrast dramatically with evidence that the Hernandez administration has made significant progress in combating organized crime and inse-

curity in Honduras. In less than two years, murders in Honduras were reduced from 86.5 per 100,000 in 2011, to 64 per 100,000 in 2014, in a country that was previously the most violent in the region.<sup>5</sup> By the estimate of the Honduran government, shipments of drugs via air have declined 98%,<sup>6</sup> an achievement publicly corroborated by U.S. authorities,<sup>7</sup> and a significant accomplishment for a country through which 80% of all U.S.-bound cocaine once passed.<sup>8</sup>

These successes of the Honduran government, largely overshadowed by the political scandals noted in the previous paragraphs, are fundamentally important not only for the country, but also for its neighbors, the region, and the United States. The 2014 immigration crisis, in which an estimated 60,000 Central American children arrived at the U.S. southern border, attempting to enter the United States, forced the Obama administration to dedicate \$3.7 billion in one month<sup>9</sup> to deal with a humanitarian crisis coming from three countries that collectively had received only \$1.2 billion in U.S. aid since 2008.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, while the solutions adopted by the Hernandez government have shortcomings and raise concerns from the perspective of democratic governance, they also contain innovative elements and have produced achievements that will serve as a reference for other states in the region with similar challenges.

Beyond the region itself, a full and nuanced understanding of the achievements and shortcomings of the security initiatives of the Hernandez government in Honduras is important for the U.S. government as it makes decisions regarding how, and to what degree, to continue to support Honduras in its fight against transnational organized crime, violence and insecurity.

While a significant amount has been written in both the Latin American and U.S. media regarding organized crime, gangs, and the political challenges faced by the Hernandez administration, there has been a relative absence of detailed academic work published in English regarding the security challenges facing Honduras, and the initiatives of the Hernandez administration for addressing them. This monograph is designed to help fill that void.

### **Methodology.**

This monograph examines the state of security challenges in Honduras, with a focus on street gangs and transnational organized crime. It reviews the principal security policies, relevant government structures, and initiatives of the Hernandez government to combat those challenges, followed by an examination in greater detail of key difficulties or areas of contention associated with that struggle, then concludes with a series of recommendations for U.S. policymakers to support Honduras' fight against the challenges of gangs and transnational organized crime.

This work employs a qualitative approach, based on in-person, telephone, and email interactions by the author with officials and academics in the Honduras' defense, security, and law enforcement sectors, including 17 in-depth interviews conducted in Tegucigalpa during July 2015, supplemented by the review and application where appropriate of English and Spanish-language documents, news accounts, and secondary sources.

## The Honduran Security Challenge.

For more than 40 years, Honduras has been an important transit country for narcotics flowing from “source zone” countries in South America, such as Colombia and Peru, to the United States.<sup>11</sup> In the 1970s, Honduran drug trafficker Juan Ramon Matta leveraged the country’s strategic geographic position as a “bridge” moving the cocaine of Pablo Escobar’s Medellín Cartel in Columbia to the Guadalajara Cartel in Mexico.<sup>12</sup>

The same strategic geography also placed Honduras in arguably the most hotly contested part of the Western Hemisphere during the Cold War. During this period, Honduras’ neighbors on all sides (Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala) were involved in civil wars with spill-over effects into Honduras, even though Honduras itself managed to avoid an internal conflict.

Beyond drugs and civil wars, the geography of Honduras has also prejudiced it with respect to hurricanes, tropical storms, and other natural disasters. More than 30 hurricanes have impacted the country since 1950, including Hurricanes Fifi and Mitch, the latter causing an estimated \$2 billion in direct damages when it struck the country in 1998, leaving an estimated 20% of the country’s population homeless.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, Honduras’ strategic location has contributed to it being one of the countries of the region most beset by gang violence, together with neighboring Guatemala and El Salvador. The gang presence centers on, but is not exclusive to, two groups: *Barrio 18* (B-18) and *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13), each of which has its origin in Central American immigration to the United States during the region’s civil wars in the 1980s.

Many settled in the greater Los Angeles area, with Central American youth giving birth to both street gangs there. The subsequent deportation of thousands of undocumented Central American immigrants with criminal records beginning in 2000<sup>14</sup> transplanted the new gangs to the region, where they quickly spread.

The security situation in Honduras has particularly degenerated during the last 15 years as a product of the interaction between gangs, drug traffickers, immigration, and weak institutions. As B-18 and MS-13 took root in Honduras and fought to displace rival gangs and each other, the resulting violence increased outbound emigration, already high because of the lack of economic opportunities in the country. Such immigration split up families, leaving more Honduran youth without two-parent family structures in violent neighborhoods, vulnerable to recruitment by the gangs.

With respect to narcotrafficking, family-based Honduran criminal smuggling groups such as the *Cachiros* and the *Los Valles* moved drugs through the region, generally financed by Mexico-based cartels and other groups. They found a readily available labor force to help it to do so, particularly in isolated rural areas with few other economic opportunities, such as the Departments (geographical divisions) of Copan, Olancho, and Gracias a Dios. Their ability to move drugs was further facilitated by a police force and political class which had come to be compromised at the highest levels by money from transnational organized crime, contributing to a dysfunctional judicial system in which impunity approached 100%, particularly for actions involving protected major criminal groups.

The growing crisis of governability in Honduras from the interaction of gangs and narcotrafficking deepened even further in 2009 when Honduran

President Mel Zelaya was ousted from power in an irregular process, which many within the country, and in the regime, saw as a violation of Honduras' democratic principles.<sup>15</sup> Whether or not the ouster of President Zelaya was defensible within the nation's laws and constitutional framework, it caused the international community, particularly in the Americas, to isolate the Honduran government,<sup>16</sup> including a cut-off of most U.S. security assistance.<sup>17</sup> In the resulting breach, Mexican cartels significantly ramped up the use of Honduran territory for U.S.-bound narcotics shipments.<sup>18</sup>

By the outset of the Hernandez administration, the movement of drugs through Honduras had come to be dominated by two family-based clans: the *Cachiros* (the Rivera Maradiaga brothers) and the *Los Valles*, although both subsequently suffered grave blows at the hands of both the Honduran government and U.S. law enforcement.

The *Cachiros*, whose origins involved smuggling, including cattle, operated principally in the inaccessible and sparsely-populated eastern portion of the country, in Departments such as Atlántida, Olancho, Colon, and Gracias a Dios. As the use of the country as an air bridge to the United States grew during the period of Honduras' international isolation, the *Cachiros* dominated such operations.

During this period, the *Cachiros* and other groups also brought significant quantities of drugs into the country by sea, initially moving much of the product along Honduras' rugged, inaccessible coastline, taking advantage of the lack of government presence there. Drugs brought in both by air and by sea were also commonly transferred to trucks, cars, motorcycles, and people for movement overland to the border with Guatemala.



Behind the scenes, the Honduran government, with the support of the United States and other international law enforcement organizations, was working to take down such networks. These efforts culminated in an important victory in January 2015 when the two top leaders of the *Cachiros*, Javier Eriberto and Devis Leonel Rivera Maradiaga, both fled to the Bahamas, where they turned themselves in to U.S. authorities.<sup>19</sup>

By contrast to the *Cachiros*, the *Los Valles* operated principally in the Department of Copan, in the west of Honduras along the border with Guatemala. Their strategic geographic position allowed them to control drug flows moving west from the Atlantic coast of Honduras, as well as from El Salvador, in the south, moving toward the Guatemalan border. *Los Valles*-affiliated smugglers reportedly controlled property on both sides of the (then poorly supervised) Honduras-Guatemalan border which they reportedly operated as their own private “customs houses” for narcotics and other contraband passing across, en route to Mexico and the United States.

Both the *Los Valles* and *Cachiros* enjoyed strong relationships to the Honduran political class, as illustrated by the case of Jose Miguel “Chepe” Handal, who reportedly purchased cocaine from the *Los Valles* on behalf of interests in Guatemala.<sup>20</sup> In doing so, Handal reportedly enjoyed protection as the cousin of Arístides Mejía, the Minister of Defense under previous Honduran President Manuel Zelaya.

The two principal heads of the *Los Valles* organization, Miguel Arnulfo and Luis Alonso Valle Valle, were arrested and extradited to the United States in October 2014.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to the two principal transporter groups, a number of other smaller drug smuggling organiza-

tions also operated in Honduras, with varying levels of affiliation with, or subordination to, the *Cachiros* and *Los Valles*. These included groups such as the “*Olancho Cartel*” (reportedly operated by the Saramiento family), the “South Valley” cartel (operating in Choluteca, the strategic point where Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador converge in the Gulf of Fonseca), and the “AA Brothers” organization. They also included the group “14e,” a shadowy umbrella organization, rumored to coordinate the efforts of the 14 leading families in San Pedro Sula involved in narcotrafficking.

With the exception of the 14e, such groups are not so much independent cartels as organizations that subcontract to, or are affiliated with, the *Los Valles* or *Cachiros*, and which have grown and have taken a measure of independence as those two groups have been progressively dismantled during the course of 2014 and 2015.

Even these smaller groups are in a state of flux. For example, members of the Saramiento family were reported to have fled to Nicaragua following actions against the *Olancho Cartel* in July 2015,<sup>22</sup> while cartel boss and mayor of the village of El Paraiso, Alexander Ardon, and his AA Cartel have reportedly become a focus of the Honduran authorities.<sup>23</sup>

As noted previously, the use of aircraft, vis-à-vis boats, to bring drugs into Honduras (particularly to the Atlantic coast), fell off with U.S. re-engagement with the country, as well as with the increased Honduran state presence since 2010, particularly in the sparsely populated eastern region of the country.

In addition, narcotraffickers continue to apply creativity and substantial resources to find new ways to conceal drug shipments, including the use of submarines. Although Honduran authorities reportedly do not intercept such vessels frequently, persons interviewed for this monograph mentioned rumors of such vehicles sunk off the northern Honduran coast in the area of Islas de Bahia, near the island of Roatan.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, transportation of drugs overland is often part of drug smuggling, including movement by car, commercial vehicle, motorcycle, and foot traffic. Shipments brought into the country by aircraft and boats are moved by such means across the country, generally to the Guatemalan border as part of their larger journey toward the United States. To do so, smugglers use a broad range of techniques to conceal their cargo; from hidden compartments in cars and trucks, to artificial breast implants, to planting cocaine in the intestines of cows.

In such operations, local labor has played an important role in offloading incoming narcotics-carrying aircraft and ships, storing drugs until such time as it is believed that security and market conditions make opportune their movement to their next destination, and physically transporting the drugs when that time comes.<sup>25</sup>

In general, Mexican groups such as the *Sinaloa Cartel* and the *Zetas*, contracted for and partially financed the movement of drugs across the country. Yet such groups generally did not operate directly in Honduras.

Honduran narcotics experts that were consulted for this monograph generally viewed the Mexican cartels as maintaining a distant and pragmatic posture with respect to narcotraffickers in the country. The cartels would frequently shift between the groups

they contracted with for drug shipments as the situation of those groups in the country evolved. Indeed, in the face of occasional robberies of drug shipments (*tumbes*), the cartels reportedly bought back the stolen drugs from the organizations that hijacked them, regarding it as a cost of business.

As previously noted, Mexican cartels have generally not operated in Honduras directly, however, the cartels and leaders have played an important role in the country and continue to maintain relationships with Honduran traffickers. The most famous example is Joaquim “El Chapo” Guzman, leader of Mexico’s *Sinaloa Cartel*, who reportedly spent time in the principal compound of *Los Valles* in the village of El Paraíso.<sup>26</sup>

The influence of the Mexican cartels is also reportedly strong in Choluteca, Honduras’ principal outlet to the Pacific coast, where the South Valley cartel of *Orlando Pinto Espino* operates.

While opinions differ regarding the presence in Honduras of Mexico’s newly emergent cartel *Jalisco Nuevo Generación*, those interviewed for this monograph generally believed that they were operating in the country. Some even suggested that they were involved in operations in the Department of Yoro, which potentially serves as a geographical bridge between the Atlantic coastal provinces and the border with Guatemala.

With respect to the *Zetas*, who came to exercise considerable influence in neighboring Guatemala during the 2008-2011 period,<sup>27</sup> although the group reportedly has a presence in Honduras,<sup>28</sup> those consulted for this monograph believed that its influence in the country was declining.

Finally, with the previously noted dismantling of the leadership of Honduras’ narcotrafficking orga-

nizations, the *Cachiros* and *Los Valles*, some Mexican cartels may now be taking a more active role in the country, reaching out to the smaller cartels and others to build new networks for transporting drugs through Honduran territory. The Honduran newspaper *El Heraldo*, for example, reported an alleged meeting between members of Mexico's *Juarez Cartel* and ranchers in Olancho to discuss such support activities.<sup>29</sup>

Beyond the movement of drugs across the country, authorities have found some evidence that, since 2013, criminal organizations have been processing drugs in laboratories in Honduras.<sup>30</sup> The first of such laboratories was uncovered in 2011 in the Merendon mountain area, near the border with Guatemala.<sup>31</sup> The second was found approximately 40 kilometers from La Ceiba, and the third was discovered in the vicinity of the village of Omoa, also close to the border with Guatemala.<sup>32</sup>

Rumors have also circulated that coca plants may be grown in the northern Department of Yola, although to date, authorities have not uncovered specific evidence that this is occurring.

Beyond cocaine, Honduran narcotics experts consulted for this monograph suggested that synthetic drugs such as methamphetamines are being produced in the country. In one case, 13.6 tons of pseudoephedrine, a precursor chemical used in the production of methamphetamines, was reportedly found in San Pedro Sula. The chemicals (the largest quantity ever found in one place in the region), were said to be linked to narcotrafficking operations of the Ramirez Corria brothers. The extent of synthetic drug production in Honduras is unknown, in part because Honduran authorities reportedly lack capabilities, such as trained police chemists, to effectively investigate such activities.

## Gangs.

With respect to gangs, as in other northern triangle countries, the two principal groups in the country are *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) and *Barrio 18* (B-18). The two are similar in strength, sophistication, and activities in Honduras, although B-18 is believed to have more members in Honduras, when measured by the number of each gang in Honduran prisons, and reportedly tends to be more violent.

The gangs are generally concentrated in the country's major urban areas; Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, and to a lesser extent, La Ceiba. B-18 is reportedly more dominant in Tegucigalpa, while MS-13 is more powerful in San Pedro Sula. La Ceiba is principally populated by smaller gangs, including *Los Grillos* and *Los Colucho*.

B-18 and MS-13 also have a limited presence in smaller towns, such as Roatan and El Paraíso. There has also been some dispersion of gang members into the countryside. In response to anti-gang legislation passed in 2001, some gang members began to migrate to rural areas, although in recent years, according to those consulted for this monograph, they have mostly reconsolidated in urban zones.

The situation of B-18 and MS-13 in Honduras is somewhat different from that in other Central American countries. In Honduras, the leadership structures of the gangs are more diffuse, and by contrast to El Salvador, a smaller percentage of their leaders are in prison. Nor has the split in B-18 between the *Revolucionarios* and *Surenos* factions, manifested in neighboring El Salvador, been replicated in Honduras.

The truce temporarily achieved between B-18, MS-13, and four smaller gangs in El Salvador in 2012,<sup>33</sup> gave rise to an attempt by Honduran Bishop Romulo Emiliani to achieve a similar pact between the gangs in Honduras.<sup>34</sup> By 2013, it was clear that such attempts had failed.<sup>35</sup>

By contrast to other Central American countries, in recent years, new smaller street gangs have also appeared in Honduras, including *Los Chirizos*,<sup>36</sup> *El Combo que no se dejan*,<sup>37</sup> and *Los Benjamin*,<sup>38</sup> each local to Tegucigalpa and generally focused on extortion.

With respect to the origins of the smaller gangs, the first two emerged from an extortion group led by the mafia figure *El Gato Negro*, who both extorted and protected merchants in the public market of Tegucigalpa from B-18 and MS-13. *El Gato Negro* was eventually assassinated (reportedly by police with whom he had previously collaborated in the extortion racket), paving the way for the emergence of *Los Chirizos* and *Los Combo Que No Se Dejan* as groups who had previously worked for him.

The criminal activities of the gangs in Honduras have generally been focused on extortion, and to a lesser degree, distributing and selling drugs in the urban areas that they control. In addition, the gangs serve as assassins for transporters and other organized crime groups.

Such groups also earn some revenue from extorting immigrants along routes to the United States. Within B-18 and MS-13, there is reportedly some specialization, where some "*clicas*" (the smallest unit of gang members) earn revenue as assassins, versus others that focus more exclusively on extortion and other crimes.

Those interviewed for this monograph emphasized the adaptability and quality of constant change of both the gang and narcotrafficking organizations in Honduras.

To some degree, as the two established gangs have aged, they have also become more “corporate,” coming to own transportation companies, bars and discos, as well as providing security for their own operations while extorting their competitors.

The current generation of gang members also generally does not use tattoos, or uses small tattoos on concealed parts of their body. This change in behavior from the previous generation of B-18 and MS-13 in El Salvador appears to be an adaptation to anti-gang legislation passed in 2001 and modified in 2015,<sup>39</sup> as well as the targeting of gang members by Honduran law enforcement, and to some extent, the social stigma of gang membership.

The gangs have also evolved as organizations. Reflecting the need to manage their substantial revenue streams, B-18 and MS-13 have sent members to schools to study skills useful to their organizations, including law and accounting.<sup>40</sup> They have also reportedly sent members to infiltrate police academies, and to a lesser extent, the military.<sup>41</sup>

With growing revenues, some senior gang leaders, referred to in some circles as “master homies,” have come to resemble successful businessmen, living in well protected neighborhoods, driving fine cars, and otherwise enjoying affluent lifestyles.

The gangs in Honduras are also evolving their activities and tactics, driven not only by the actions of authorities, but also popular culture. One law enforcement expert interviewed in Tegucigalpa for this monograph noted, for example, that in the months follow-



ing the broadcast of the television drama “*Cartel de los Zapos*” (a dramatization of the exploits of Colombian drug kingpin Pablo Escobar), the use of motorcycles to commit assassinations in the streets of Tegucigalpa (a tactic highlighted by the show) experienced a significant surge in Honduras, prompting the National Assembly to pass a law prohibiting the carrying of passengers on motorcycles.<sup>42</sup>

### **Honduras’ New Initiatives to Combat Organized Crime and Insecurity.**

With the election of Porfirio Lobo in November 2009, and in recognition of the dramatic expansion in narcotrafficking activity that occurred in the country during its period of isolation by the international community following the ouster of President Manuel Zelaya, the United States began to re-engage with Honduras in the security domain in important, albeit limited ways.

On the Honduran side, President Lobo took important actions during his presidency to re-engage with the United States and combat organized crime and delinquency. An oversight body for investigating police corruption was created and the military was given the authorization to support the national police. A new Honduran national security council was established, as well as a constitutional reform permitting extradition to the United States. Lastly, a major counter-organized crime initiative, “Operation LIGHTNING”<sup>43</sup> was launched. One key to Lobo’s success with such new initiatives under difficult circumstances was his strong relationship with then head of the National Congress (subsequently elected President) Juan Orlando Hernandez, who helped to craft many of the initiatives and secured their passage in the Congress.

While not widely appreciated outside of Honduras, the scope of changes in laws related to public security in Honduras under President Lobo, and subsequently President Hernandez, is impressive. Former Interior Minister and head of the non-governmental *Centro de Documentación de Honduras* (Documentation Center of Honduras [CEDOH]) catalogs 34 separate laws which have been passed since 2010 regarding security and defense matters.<sup>44</sup>

Since assuming office, President Juan Orlando Hernandez has relied heavily (albeit not exclusively) on the Honduran military, reflecting his conviction, shared by many in the country, that in the near term, the national police and other instruments of government have been too thoroughly penetrated by criminal elements to be effective.<sup>45</sup>

According to senior Hondurans knowledgeable of the President who were interviewed for this monograph, Hernandez's disposition to use the military as his primary tool for combating organized crime has roots in his past experiences. Hernandez attended a conservative military academy in San Pedro Sula in his youth and reportedly has a particularly close personal relationship to Amilcar Hernandez, one of his 16 brothers, who was a well-respected officer in the Honduran military before his career was cut short by an accident during a military parachute jump.

To date, the cornerstone of President Hernandez's approach to combating organized crime in Honduras has been the creation of an operational-level inter-agency task force to execute operations against transnational organized crime and insecurity in the country. The task force, *Fuerza de Seguridad Interinstitucional Nacional* (National Interagency Task Force [FUSINA]) was planned and officially established upon the President's January 2014 inauguration.

Although the organization was compared by persons interviewed for this monograph to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), in actuality, FUSINA is narrower and more operational in its orientation than DHS. Nonetheless, its significance as a creative and ambitious structure, wrestling with the inter-institutional challenges of the fight against organized crime and delinquency in Honduras is no less ambitious, and no less filled with challenges.

Although officially, FUSINA was created by President Hernandez, the organization also reflects intellectual inputs from the nation's key military leaders, including commander-in-chief of the Honduran armed forces General Freddy Santiago Díaz Zelaya, as well as Colonel Gustavo Adolfo Paz Escalante, who became FUSINA's first director.

### **National Interagency Task Force (FUSINA).**

FUSINA operates under the authority of the Honduran National Security Council, created by Hernandez's predecessor, Pepe Lobo. It includes the President, the President of the National Congress, the President of the Supreme Court, the Attorney General, the Secretary of the Presidency, the Minister of Defense, the Minister of Public Security, and the head of the Honduran Joint Chiefs of Staff. While, for use in this role, the National Security Council and its members are specified in the Honduran constitution, not all Presidents have made use of the council as actively as President Hernandez has.

Although FUSINA is not specified in the framework of the Honduran constitution, the government characterizes FUSINA as the "operational arm" of the National Security Council, particularly in matters of

combating organized crime and insecurity. The members of the National Security Council provide oversight of FUSINA, particularly the Minister of Defense and Minister of National Security, and are reportedly consulted when FUSINA executes operations against high-impact personalities, such as major narcotraffickers or political figures. Nonetheless, the day-to-day activities of FUSINA are managed by the colonel-level military officer, currently Gustavo Paz, who heads the organization.<sup>46</sup>

The guide for the activities of FUSINA is the President's "Interagency National Security Plan," adopted upon his assumption of office. The plan addresses both FUSINA and its primary mission, "Operation MORAZÁN."<sup>47</sup> By contrast to previously conducted interagency operations of more limited scope, such as Operation LIBERTAD,<sup>48</sup> Operation MORAZÁN contemplates operations by FUSINA against criminal organizations and insecurity in the entirety of the national territory.

Operation MORAZÁN includes four phases:

1. **Configuration and Dissuasion**, realized during President Hernandez's first two months in office, during which time key structures to implement the new plan, including the Military Police of Public Order (PMOP), were set up;
2. **Taking the Initiative**, officially spanning from January through May 2014, during which time the major operations contemplated under the plan were launched;
3. **Domination**, from May 2014 through January 2016, during which time the newly established security structures are envisioned to substantially re-establish order in the country; and,
4. **Stabilization and Transition**, from January 2016 through January 2018, during which time

the new security organizations are anticipated to “consolidate their successes” and importantly, return control to civil authorities.<sup>49</sup>

From the name “Operation MORAZÁN,” to the use of terms such as “domination,” the plan reflects its military roots. While such language (to be “dominated”) presumably refers to organized crime rather than civil society, the choice of words highlights the differences in attitudes between the Honduran armed forces and other parts of civil society.

With respect to the establishment of FUSINA as the key organization for implementing Operation MORAZÁN, the organization has been assigned part, but not all, of the assets of the armed forces and national police, as well as judicial investigators and judges. Other elements of the armed forces and resources of the Honduran government are reportedly available to be assigned to FUSINA on short notice, when needed.

Although as noted previously, the head of FUSINA is a military officer, its second in command is an officer of the National Police. In addition, reflecting FUSINA’s intra-institutional character, the other agencies contributing resources are included on its managing executive board, facilitating access to those organizations for operational issues.

The entirety of the newly created PMOP (discussed later in greater detail) is assigned to FUSINA, as well as the elite paramilitary police force, the *Tigres*. With respect to Honduran Army, Navy, and Air Force units, as of July 2015, FUSINA had 6,300 members of the armed forces under its jurisdiction, including over 3,000 members of PMOP, and approximately half of Honduras’ naval assets.<sup>50</sup>

Other Honduran government organizations that could potentially play a role in the fight against gangs and criminal organizations, available to be tasked by FUSINA, include the nation's principal counter-drug agency, the *Dirección de la Lucha Contra Narcotráfico* (Directorate for Combating Drug Trafficking [DLCN]).<sup>51</sup>

Organizationally, below the level of senior leadership, FUSINA is divided into 18 intra-institutional task forces, generally organized by the Departments of Honduras (for budgetary, as well as operational reasons). Special additional task forces, such as Maya-Chorti, whose mission is to control illicit flows (including people and contraband as well as drugs) along the border with Guatemala, are also included as distinct entities within the FUSINA command structure.

Replicating the organization at the national level, each task force is co-led by a military officer and an officer of the National Police, and generally includes some military and police personnel, at least one investigator from the "public ministry,"<sup>52</sup> as well as access to judges with national jurisdiction for making rapid decisions on special cases, such as the disposition, and potentially extradition, of high-profile cartel heads.

### **Military Police for Public Order (PMOP).**

The PMOP is the best known and most controversial component of President Hernandez's security plan, and arguably the most misunderstood.

The PMOP organizationally falls under the joint chiefs of staff of the Honduran armed forces, although as noted previously, it is operationally assigned in its entirety to FUSINA. The enabling law for the PMOP was designed and passed through the Honduran Congress in August 2013 by Hernandez himself, who was then President of the body.<sup>53</sup>

The principal objective of the PMOP is to serve as a professional force free of the corruption undercutting the effectiveness and the public acceptance of the National Police; and that can legally and practically conduct a subset of difficult law enforcement operations, such as imposing order in urban neighborhoods dominated by the *maras* (gangs) and conducting actions against narcotrafficking organizations.

In addition to such core missions, PMOP has also been deployed in other roles, including providing security for important public events and escorting high-profile criminals to prison or to the airport for extradition.<sup>54</sup>

As of July 2015, the PMOP had six battalions, each with 524 persons, and similar complements of vehicles and equipment, as well as a canine battalion, oriented toward counter-drug operations. The first two battalions were created in September 2013 and were deployed in Tegucigalpa and its sister city Comayagüela. The third and fourth battalions were created in February 2014, and the fifth, sixth, and the canine battalion in August 2014.

The PMOP is anticipated to grow to 10 battalions, plus the canine battalion, with a total complement of 5,976 members. While the Hernandez administration has talked about an eventual “return to civilian control” in Honduras after the problem of gangs and insecurity is brought under control, and while such is clearly contemplated in the fourth phase of Operation MORAZÁN, Honduran experts interviewed for this monograph indicated that the PMOP would likely continue in existence.

Although President Hernandez sought a constitutional amendment that would have separated the PMOP from the Honduran armed forces as a separate force under the executive branch, the defeat of this initiative in the Honduran Congress in January 2015<sup>55</sup> left the organization as formally part of the military. Undeterred, the President has announced his intention to revisit the issue of enshrining the PMOP within the Honduran constitution as an independent entity through a popular referendum to be held in conjunction with the 2017 national elections.<sup>56</sup>

In establishing its doctrine, the PMOP has received substantial assistance from the Honduran armed forces, including help in formulating its doctrine from the doctrine organization of the Honduran Joint Chiefs of Staff; although in doctrine and other matters, PMOP has also drawn insights from the Honduran National Police, the military police of the United States, and other foreign partners such as Mexico, Colombia, and Guatemala. According to PMOP authorities consulted for this monograph, the organization continues to refine its doctrine and they hope to have it consolidated by 2016.

At the level of enlisted personnel, the PMOP is populated by the selection of candidates from volunteers from the Honduran armed forces. By contrast, the officers of the PMOP are assigned to the unit by the leadership. Thus, all PMOP personnel, both officers and civilians are, or become, active duty military personnel.

Within the enlisted ranks, those interested in joining the PMOP must have at least one year of service in the armed forces and must receive the approval of their commanding officer to apply. According to representatives of the Honduran military interviewed for



this monograph, applicants from all ranks and experience levels are accepted, but aside from officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs), younger recruits are preferred because of their presumed physical adeptness, as well as to avoid, where possible, disciplinary challenges arising from a large number of older recruits supervised by younger officers.

Non-military applicants are accepted into the PMOP only in a limited number of fields, including those with experience in law, medicine, and psychology.

As the ranks of the PMOP units are filled, the armed forces conduct a parallel campaign to backfill those units from which the PMOP recruits are taken. According to Honduran officers consulted for this monograph, this process has caused some loss of experience and personnel shortages in operational units, although the adverse impacts are expected to level off once the current surge to create all 10 PMOP battalions has passed.

Once accepted, those entering the PMOP receive initial training in basic competencies of the institution. Officers and NCOs attend the two-month long “Military Police Operations Course,” while those of lower ranks attend the four month “Basic Course.” Both courses are taught in the armored cavalry post RECALBLIN (*Regimiento de Caballería Blindado*) in the Department of Choluteca.

As of the end of 2015, both courses were taught by officials from the military police itself, by definition, former military officers with two years or less in the organization (based on the date of the PMOP’s creation).

Upon graduating the operations course or basic course, candidates are officially accepted as members

of the PMOP. From this point, candidates may receive additional training in police specialties, such as forensic graphology, customs, crime scene investigations, the chain of custody, combat medicine, and human rights. For these specialty courses, outside experts are brought in, including personnel from the public ministry, which supports the PMOP through programs in their "Training School for the Public Ministry."

In order to avoid the risk that those joining the PMOP are, or later become, corrupt (as has occurred widely within the Honduran national police), the PMOP has a program of monitoring and confidence tests, including psychological testing and other screening upon entry, as well as polygraphs approximately every six months for those members serving in the organization. In addition, by contrast to regular police officers, the military structure of PMOP places its members under more constant supervision and deploys its members in a fashion that, in principle, gives them fewer opportunities for close contact with the people in the zones in which they operate. As a result, those interviewed for this monograph argue that members of the PMOP are less vulnerable to being corrupted.

On the other hand, others argue that the limitations that the PMOP have in their contact with the population also gives them fewer opportunities to gather intelligence from, and build positive relationships with, that population.

## **Tigres.**

The elite national police unit called the *Tigres* (Tigers), like the PMOP, was spearheaded as a legislative initiative of Juan Orlando Hernandez before he became president.<sup>57</sup>

The *Tigres* were designed to be an elite, highly capable unit within the police force for taking on difficult missions like those against transnational organized crime groups. From the beginning, the unit was closely coordinated with, and substantially funded by the United States, which provided equipment, confidence testing, and training paid for by the U.S. Department of State, including courses conducted by Colombian Special Forces units.

At the time of the research for this monograph, the *Tigres* had an estimated 250 persons, less than a tenth the number of personnel in the PMOP.

An important contributor to Hernandez, then head of the Congress, in establishing the *Tigres* was not only the pervasive corruption within the regular Honduran police, but also nine prior initiatives by the United States to establish special units within that force in areas such as anti-gang activities, anti-kidnapping, and counter-narcotics; this emphasized to him and others in the government that in providing assistance in the fight against organized crime and insecurity, the United States preferred to work through civilian organizations.

While organizationally the *Tigres* are part of the Honduran National Police, within the Ministry of Public Security, they are under the operational command of FUSINA, along with the PMOP.

Despite the substantial capabilities of the unit, the Honduran government sought to minimize the public profile of the force following an unfortunate incident involving the improper diversion of \$1.3 million in cash seized<sup>58</sup> in October 2014, during the unit's first major operation; the arrest of Miguel Arnulfo and Luis Alonso Valle Valle, leaders of the Honduran narcotics smuggling organization *Los Valles*.<sup>59</sup> Although

the theft was quickly discovered, the incident cast a shadow over the unit at a key moment when the question of the need for a “military police,” rather than new or reformed units within the Honduran National police, was a key theme of debate.

As a complement to the creation of new structures such as the PMOP and the *Tigres*, the Hernandez administration has also engaged in a purge of corrupt elements of the National Police.<sup>60</sup> As set forth in Operation MORAZÁN, the official plan of the Honduran government is to return law enforcement operations to civilian organizations such as the National Police once both public order has been restored and corruption within police institutions has been brought under control.

### **Other Organizations within the Public Ministry.**

Although FUSINA and the PMOP, and to a lesser extent the *Tigres*, have received the lion’s share of media attention in the Hernandez administration’s struggle against organized crime, other organizations have also played an important role. These include *Agencia Técnico de Investigación Criminal* (ATIC), *Fiscal Especial Contra el Crimen Organizado* (FESCO), and the *Dirección de la Lucha Contra Narcotráfico* (DLCN).

According to Hondurans consulted for this monograph, the creation of ATIC was driven by Honduran Attorney General Oscar Fernandez Chinchilla to provide greater investigative capabilities within the public ministry. ATIC has received a significant share of resources, particularly in the 2015 fiscal year, generating some resentment from other organizations, such as DNIC, whose own budget has not expanded to a similar degree. As of July 2015, ATIC had approxi-

mately 120 investigators, with an additional 50 reportedly being added.

The DLCN, as noted previously, is the principal investigative organization in the fight against criminal organizations. It was created in 1995 as an independent organization under the Honduran Public Ministry. As of July 2015, the DLCN had a modest force of 53, although it was programmed to nearly double in size, with 43 new investigators. The body works closely with FUSINA in the fight against criminal organizations. Indeed, its support from the armed forces is explicitly specified in Article 48 of the law enabling the organization.

Prior to December 2015, the DLCN was headed by Isaac Santos, a retired military officer. Owing to differences with the head of the Public Ministry, Oscar Fernando Chinchilla, Santos was dismissed and replaced by Soraya Cálix, a career criminal investigator who previously headed the Public Ministry Office of the Special Prosecutor Against Organized Crime.<sup>61</sup>

In addition to its funding by the Honduran government, the DLCN also receives training and other support from the Russian Federal Drug Control Service (FSKN),<sup>62</sup> among other international organizations. Senior DLCN personnel, such as its deputy head Zoilo Salustio Hernandez, reportedly travel frequently to Russia for training programs.

### **FUSINA Operations.**

As of July 2015, within the framework of Operation MORAZÁN, the most significant operational activities of FUSINA included the interdiction of narcotrafficking flows, operations against narcotraffickers and other high-profile criminals, and the establishment of

security in areas dominated by *maras*, and other police organizations.<sup>63</sup>

To this end, two types of FUSINA operations stood out.

First, FUSINA deployed significant numbers of the newly created PMOP to major urban areas, such as Tegucigalpa, Comayagüela, and San Pedro Sula. These forces patrolled public spaces, and allowed authorities to re-establish a presence in neighborhoods such as Flor del Campo (Tegucigalpa), which had previously become so heavily dominated by gangs that the national police did not dare to enter.

Second, FUSINA employed its forces to deny the use of national territory as a transit zone or base of operations for narcotraffickers. The efforts of FUSINA in this respect is conceptualized in terms of three “shields”:

1. an **air shield**, which refers to control over Honduran airspace against narcotics flights, particularly in the remote and sparsely populated eastern part of the country, which became a major problem during Honduras’ period of international isolation in 2009;
2. a **maritime shield**, to protect the Honduran coast and inland waterways against the importation of drugs and their associated transfer to overland traffic via vehicles and persons, generally toward Guatemala; and,
3. a **land shield**, associated with the control of the Honduran-Guatemala border via the inter-agency Maya-Chorti Task Force, as well as the deployment of military forces throughout the country to control routes used to move drugs overland from clandestine airstrips and coastal and river disembarkation points across the country, generally toward that border.

The air shield was enabled by the passage of a law in January 2014, authorizing the Honduran military to shoot down aircraft making unauthorized incursions into its national airspace.<sup>64</sup> Its application in Honduran airspace is supported by the acquisition of three radars from Israel, delivered in late 2013.<sup>65</sup> Nonetheless, the risk that the program could lead to the downing of an innocent aircraft by the Honduran military reportedly raised concerns within the United States, which, in response, restricted military support activities that could contribute to such a shoot-down.<sup>66</sup>

Although Honduran officials interviewed for this monograph maintained that the air shield is functioning well even without U.S. support, to date, the Honduran military has not forced down a single aircraft. Nonetheless, since the implementation of the air shield, drug flights to Honduras have fallen dramatically.<sup>67</sup>

As a complement to blocking air traffic, the Honduran government also engages in a continual process of identifying and destroying clandestine airstrips in the country.<sup>68</sup> However, one official consulted for this monograph characterized such operations as a relatively unproductive game, with the government disabling airstrips and the narcotraffickers rebuilding them. Yet, others consulted for this study countered, arguing that despite the ease of building airstrips in the generally flat terrain in the east of the country in La Mosquitia, the drug trafficker's response provides insights into who the narcotraffickers are and who is helping them, since doing so generates observable and traceable activity, particularly since construction equipment is not common in the remote areas where such airstrips are built.<sup>69</sup>

With respect to the maritime shield, the Honduran government has generally focused on deploying naval assets along the Atlantic coast, where the Honduran Navy has boosted its presence from one modest shore facility to seven, in addition to augmenting control points on inland rivers.

At least two Honduran naval craft have been deployed in the Gulf of Fonseca to perform counter-drug missions.

To date, the maritime domain has been the area in which the United States has most effectively been able to help Honduras with material, training, and intelligence support, as well as with its own complementary maritime operations.<sup>70</sup>

In addition to support from the United States, the Honduran Navy has generally been effective in working with Nicaragua to coordinate intercept operations along the coast shared by the two countries. According to persons interviewed for this monograph, such cooperation reportedly includes relatively fluid exchanges of intelligence and is bolstered by good political relations between the two countries and their presidents.<sup>71</sup>

In the Gulf of Fonseca, on Honduras' Pacific coast, coordination of naval intercept operations is complicated by the unresolved dispute over the maritime boundary in the area between Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador,<sup>72</sup> although the coordination between the three navies has reportedly improved.

In general terms, Honduras' maritime shield has been limited by a relatively small navy of aging vessels supporting a relatively high operational tempo. Honduras currently has three large craft and 25 smaller vessels. Nonetheless, the country has acquisition projects that would increase its capabilities.



As an example, the capability of the Honduran Navy to perform coastal intercepts has been bolstered by new militarized “go-fast” boats, seized from narcotraffickers. With assistance from the United States, these craft have been adapted with new 300 horsepower 4-cylinder engines, hull modifications, and gun mounts. According to senior Hondurans consulted for this monograph, these new craft have been particularly useful for patrolling in the relatively shallow waters along the Atlantic shoreline, which features numerous inlets and islands.

Beyond these “go-fast” boats, the Honduran Navy is reportedly considering the acquisition of two new roll-on/roll-off landing craft from the Colombian vendor Cotecmar, as well as a new offshore patrol vessel.

Turning to the land shield portion of Honduras’ counter-drug operations, the principal focus to date of the Honduran government has been the control of the Honduras-Guatemala border. Through FUSINA, the Honduran government has also deployed ground forces to control routes for the movement of drugs in other parts of the country.

The primary vehicle for controlling Honduras’ border with Guatemala has been the interagency Maya-Chorti Task Force. One important goal for FUSINA in operating this task force on the border between the two countries has been to cut the numerous informal border crossings (*pasos ciegos*) that allow narcotics and other contraband to move across the border without state control. A study by the Conference of Central American Armed Forces (CFAC) estimated that there were 55 such informal crossings along the Honduras-Guatemala border alone.

While the Maya-Chorti Task Force has significantly increased the presence of Honduran forces in the

border region,<sup>73</sup> the sheer quantity of drugs moving through the area, the difficult terrain, and the number of people with adjoining property on both sides of the border facilitating passage of contraband through the *pasos ciegos* continue to make controlling the border difficult.

Beyond the presence of the Maya-Chorti Task Force on the border, the majority of FUSINA's PMOP and civilian police elements are deployed in Honduras' principal urban areas: Tegucigalpa, Comayagüela, and San Pedro Sula. Smaller numbers of ground forces are also deployed throughout the country to control overland movement of narcotics, to provide security, to gather intelligence, and to conduct operations against high-profile criminals once authorized by judicial and other appropriate authorities.

With respect to operations against specific criminal targets, the FUSINA concept of operations begins with intelligence to identify a potential criminal target or activity of interest. Such intelligence is obtained from multiple sources, including the country's newly-created National Investigative Intelligence Organization (*Dirección Nacional de Investigación e Inteligencia* [DNII]), formed in 2013,<sup>74</sup> and which reportedly has a particular specialization in electronic intelligence. Such intelligence collection includes obtaining information from PMOP units, civilian national police units, investigative organizations such as the national counter-narcotrafficking organization (DNIC), as well as foreign sources, with important partners reportedly including Nicaragua,<sup>75</sup> Colombia, Guatemala, and the United States.

Supported by such multi-source intelligence, in principle, FUSINA leverages the prosecutors under its operational control in conjunction with investigators from supporting organizations such as DNIC, to

prepare cases to be acted upon. Where the case requires police action against a criminal target, FUSINA then obtains the authorization of the relevant judicial authority to proceed. For normal operations, a local judge will typically be used to approve such action; but for high-profile cases where there is concern that the local judge could be corrupted or intimidated, FUSINA has three special judges with national jurisdiction and presents its request to one of these individuals to authorize police action.

In addition to such judges, another organizational innovation of FUSINA in the fight against organized crime is the use of embedded investigators and prosecutors. Such investigators and prosecutors are operationally assigned to FUSINA and often travel with the military and police units to the scene of the operation. The FUSINA leadership believes that such integration makes the process of coordination between parts of the police/criminal system faster and more accurate, helping to eliminate delays and miscues that contributed to the near total impunity within the Honduran justice system. Prior to embedded investigators and prosecutors, for example, military or police units would conduct an operation and then transfer the case to authorities to conduct a judicial investigation. Under the new system, with police investigators and prosecutors present during the operation, they are reportedly able to do their investigation more rapidly, as well as with a better understanding of what actually transpired in the operation.

The new approach also generated concerns. One law enforcement expert consulted for this monograph noted that having an investigator spend days “tromping around in the woods with a military unit” was perhaps not the best use of time, given the limited number of prosecutors available.

The new system also raises questions about protection of citizen rights through the traditional separation between police, prosecutor, and judge, creating the appearance of “judicial officials being put in the service of the police.”

Yet such concerns notwithstanding, the new system has arguably contributed to improvements in the struggle against crime and insecurity in the country.

With respect to the conduct of operations at a technical level under the new system, if a law enforcement action such as the detention of a person is necessary, FUSINA may use either PMOP units, national police units (including recently created elite units such as the *Tigres*), or a combination of both to execute the operation. As an example, the previously mentioned October 2014 operation to detain Miguel Arnulfo and Luis Alonso Valle Valle employed both the *Tigres* and the PMOP, as well as other units.<sup>76</sup>

To understand the change represented by the employment of PMOP in operations against transnational organized crime entities, it is important to note that in the pre-FUSINA period in Honduras, as in other Central American countries such as El Salvador, the military conducted operations in tandem with national police units in order to have sufficient firepower and legal arrest authority. In Honduras, perhaps even more so than in those other countries, the level of corruption within the police puts many operations at risk due to the possibility that some people in the police chain of command are being paid by criminal organizations and tipping off the criminals prior to the conduct of an operation. The use of the PMOP, by taking the national police out of the chain, has likely reduced the risk of compromised operations. Yet in the short term, one troubling side effect has been to substitute

the military for the police in important law enforcement operations, relegating the police to only routine or inconsequential activities.

Beyond improved coordination between military, law enforcement, and judicial organizations, FUSINA has also sought to increase jointness and the interagency character of Honduran government operations. The organization, for example, coordinates the use of naval assets to resupply and move personnel of other military branches and government organizations between posts, including naval bases and other control points in remote parts of the country. Such coordination has become increasingly important, not only for deploying investigators, prosecutors, police and military police contingents, and supporting intelligence operations in remote areas, but also in supporting the Honduran Navy in establishing and sustaining multiple new bases to control remote areas of the country's coast, such as in the Department of Gracias a Dios.

To minimize the probability of the corruption of the soldiers, policemen, investigators, and others in the organization, FUSINA has adopted a policy of frequent personnel rotations; yet doing so has created a significant logistics burden. In addition to the adverse impact on personnel, the ships, aircraft, and vehicles used to transport the personnel are strained as well. Finally, the rotation policy requires FUSINA to reimburse the Honduran Navy for fuel and other resources that are used in support of FUSINA operations.

Lastly, in addition to the operations themselves, the leadership of FUSINA has recognized the importance of strategic communication and has dedicated attention to managing public perceptions of its successes. As an example, statistics involving the activities of the organizations under its operational control,

including counter-narcotics operations, actions against clandestine runways, confiscation of properties, arms seizures, arrests of criminal leaders, and other activities, are reported through FUSINA.<sup>77</sup> Even when an operation is primarily performed by one particular organization, such as the PMOP, the *Tigres*, ATIC, or the DNIC, per policy of the Honduran leadership, it is reported as performed “by FUSINA” with “the support of” the other Honduran organizations. While persons consulted for this monograph indicated that this posture has caused some minor resentment among the organizations leading the operation, it has also arguably bolstered the image of FUSINA and the perception that the government is conducting a coordinated national-level campaign against organized crime and insecurity.

### **Penitentiary Reform.**

In parallel with activities of FUSINA and associated organizations such as the PMOP, the Hernandez administration is also attempting to reform the penitentiary system. Like other penitentiary systems in Central America and elsewhere in the region, that of Honduras is considered vastly overcrowded with an inmate population of more than 14,500 and growing, in facilities with a capacity for 8,000.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, as in neighboring Guatemala and El Salvador, the facilities have become dominated by the criminals who inhabit them, using them as secure spaces from which to manage their extortion operations in coordination with members of their organization on the outside.<sup>79</sup>

One of the initiatives already put into place by the Hernandez administration is the blocking of cell phone service to and from the prisons to limit the number of

extortion calls made from inside.<sup>80</sup> Such control has been partially successful, with a significant decrease in such extortion calls.<sup>81</sup> Reportedly, such controls have not been completely effective because it has not been possible to block all calls, including those by prisoners using contraband satellite phones (for which service is not interrupted by the blocking of cellphone signals) and because prisoners are still able to communicate with the outside through visits from family members, relaying instructions to others who can deliver the extortion demands by phone or in person from outside the prison walls.<sup>82</sup>

To help address the challenge of prison overcrowding, the Hernandez administration proposed creating two new facilities: a minimum-security and a medium-to-maximum security prison, which together would provide capacity for 4,500 inmates. To date, the first of these facilities, in the town of Porvenir, with space for 2,000 inmates, has been completed. The second, in the north of the country near the town of Anaco, designed to house 2,400 inmates, is reportedly going slowly due to cost overruns and lack of resources.

The Honduran military has also created a small detention facility for high-level prisoners within the compound of the 1st Battalion, with space for approximately 20 persons, maintaining those held there in relative isolation and control, if also under relatively sparse conditions, reportedly without access to cellphones or computers.

At the same time that the government is adding these two new prisons and the small supplemental facility in the 1st Battalion headquarters, the government is also contemplating consolidating the 24 facilities throughout the country down to 12 and modernizing and re-establishing control over those that remain.

While in the short term, control of Honduran prisons remains a problem, as with Honduras' neighbors, the military is attempting to play a role by controlling the perimeters separating the prisons from the outside communities; yet prison perimeter control is not a popular mission for the military and only partially prevents activities, such as the smuggling of weapons and contraband cellphones to inmates. However, it is regarded by the military as necessary because of the failure of civilian law enforcement to prevent such flows due to the ability of the gangs to corrupt and intimidate those controlling the prisons. This includes realistic threats to harm prison workers and their families due to the ties that inmates have with gangs outside the prison.

### **Cooperation with the United States.**

In its activities against organized crime and insecurity, the Hernandez administration has made an effort to work more closely with the United States, albeit with mixed success.

As president of the Congress, in January 2012, Hernandez successfully spearheaded a change to the provision of the Honduran constitution prohibiting extradition; and in May 2014, the country conducted its first extradition to the United States: Carlos Arnol-do Lobo.<sup>83</sup> Although not widely publicized, Honduran experts consulted for this monograph noted that the country continues to extradite an average of approximately five people to the United States per week.

The Honduran government has also worked closely with the United States on operations against the leadership of narcotrafficking groups, particularly the



two principal family-based smuggling organizations in the country: the *Los Valles* and the *Cachiros*.

In addition, the Hernandez administration has cooperated closely with the United States in the area of maritime narcotrafficking interdiction operations as part of the maritime shield concept.<sup>84</sup>

At a personal level, President Hernandez reportedly has had a particularly good relationship with the U.S. Southern Command and General John F. Kelly, the U.S. Marine Corps general who commanded it through the end of 2015.<sup>85</sup>

### **Cooperation with Other Countries.**

While Honduras continues to work closely with the United States in its fight against gangs, drugs, and other elements of organized crime and insecurity, it also collaborates with and receives support in this struggle from a variety of other countries, including Taiwan, Russia, Nicaragua, and Guatemala, among others.

With respect to Russia, as noted previously, Honduras' principal counter-narcotics organization, the DLCN, and potentially other organizations, reportedly receive training and intelligence support from their Russian counterpart, the FSKN.

Nicaragua is reportedly one of the closest collaborators in the region with Honduras with respect to counter-narcotics intelligence, as well as police and military operations. There is reportedly a fluid cooperation between the two countries in patrolling their combined shoreline, and the presidents of both countries reportedly enjoy a close personal relationship.

Guatemala is the first country in the region to establish joint multinational patrols with Honduras along their shared border, in the form of the Maya-Chorti Task Force.<sup>86</sup> Currently, the two countries reportedly collaborate closely with respect to managing the shared border and on other issues.

### **Impacts of Honduran Government Efforts in the Fight Against Organized Crime and Gangs.**

Although President Hernandez had only been in power two years at the time this monograph was written, his administration's security policies have had a remarkable impact on delinquency and organized crime in the country. Nonetheless, some outside the administration have questioned the accuracy of government figures showing strong progress against murders and criminal activity.<sup>87</sup> Whatever the truth regarding the statistics, it is clear that much work remains to be done.

According to official figures, homicides in Honduras during the January-July period dropped from 3,688 in 2013, to 3,271 in 2014, to 2,757 in 2015.<sup>88</sup>

With respect to narco-flights, prior to the Hernandez regime, almost 80% of U.S.-bound drug flights stopped in Honduras. By 2015, thanks in part to the country's air interdiction program, the number of such flights showing up on U.S. radars had fallen to almost negligible numbers.<sup>89</sup>

Narcotraffickers moving drugs are reportedly changing tactics. Some have switched from light planes to larger turboprop aircraft. Another new tactic has been an increase in short, low-altitude flights below the radar monitoring the area. With respect to the overland traffic, Honduran authorities noted an increase in the use of vehicles with hidden compart-

ments (*caletas*), as well as more smuggling inside of animals such as mules and horses. In the maritime domain, those moving drugs through the country previously sent large shipments of up to 2,000 kg of cocaine in “go-fast” boats. During the past year, however, there has reportedly been a trend toward the use of smaller, slower vessels, following more indirect routes.

According to Honduran law enforcement officials, Honduran traffickers used to bring in narco-shipments by air to Atlantic coast towns, such as Palacios in the northeast of the country, and openly transfer their cargo into armored cars for transit to Guatemala via highway. In the past year, they have reportedly switched to more remote landing facilities in areas such as Ibanos and Brus, then covertly moving their product via canals and other means before eventually being able to use roads.

Another observed shift, prompted by increased counter-drug activities in the east of the country, is the expanded use of routes along the Pacific coast to move drugs. Areas such as Choluteca (on the Pacific coast of the country where Honduras converges with El Salvador to the north and Nicaragua to the south) have reported an increase in narcotrafficking activity. The increased use of the Pacific side of the country for drug smuggling is reflected in the unexplained surge in upscale houses, hotels, and other establishments in Choluteca. The expansion of routes on the Pacific side of the country includes the smuggling of cocaine across the Nicaraguan border in animals.

In addition to the displacement of narcotrafficking operations to the Pacific, more drugs are reportedly being sent from South America through Costa Rica and Panama, instead of directly to Honduras.

Beyond the impact on patterns of trafficking and the tactics of narcotraffickers, the combination of increased interdiction activities and increased operations against cartel leaders has reportedly had an impact on the structure of criminal groups moving narcotics. Smaller groups, which were once contractors to major family clans such as the *Cachiros*, including: the *Byron Ruiz* organization, Ramon Matta (son of famous cartel leader Juan Ramon Matta), the *Olancho Cartel* of Moises Amador (who was eliminated in an operation in July 2015), the *Sizo Cartel*, and the *Brus Cartel*, are reportedly working in a more independent fashion, generating increased violence in some areas of the country as a result.

With respect to *maras*, the intervention of the military police has allowed the government to re-establish presence in some urban neighborhoods. The most celebrated case has been the re-establishing of state presence in the Flor de Campo, a neighborhood in the south of Tegucigalpa, once so dominated by the gangs that the national police could not maintain a presence there.<sup>90</sup> The PMOP has also reportedly restored state presence in other once gang-ridden neighborhoods as well, including Ulloa, Carrizal, Campo Cielo, and Centavo in the south of Tegucigalpa, as well as the El Lato and Barrio Kennedy neighborhoods in the heart of the city.<sup>91</sup>

Despite progress in such neighborhoods, persons consulted for this monograph generally concurred that only limited progress had been made in reducing the level of extortion and other criminal activities by the gangs. Others noted that in some urban neighborhoods, merchants such as taxi and bus drivers who once had to pay extortion money to three or four different groups, now only have to pay off the principal two (B-18 and MS-13).

To some degree, in reaction to the presence of the PMOP and increased activities by Honduran law enforcement in general, the groups are reportedly changing their extortion tactics, making greater use of radios and other communication alternatives to cell phones to avoid government electronic surveillance. Some gangs are also employing children to collect extortion payments, as well as obligating non-gang-affiliated civilians to participate in such activities to prevent them from exposing gang members to law enforcement organizations.

### **Challenges for Honduras in the Fight Against Organized Crime.**

The ability of Honduras to make significant advances against organized crime and insecurity must be understood in the context of uncertainty in the continuity of the current Hernandez administration. As noted in the introduction of this monograph, throughout 2015, and particularly in July, the Hernandez government was confronted by protesters calling themselves the “indignant,” decrying what they saw as a combination of corruption and procedural irregularities by the President and those surrounding him, seeking to enrich themselves and to centralize power, using payoffs and other forms of influence within the nation’s institutions to marginalize its political opponents.<sup>92</sup>

Yet such protests do not necessarily reflect a desire to replace the Hernandez administration with a return to the previous left-of-center regime of Manuel Zelaya, or its contemporary manifestation, the LIBRE movement, even if he and his followers hope to capitalize on it as such.<sup>93</sup>

The continuity of the Hernandez administration in power neither assures success in the fight against organized crime and insecurity, nor would its fall condemn the nation to devolve into a narco-state. Yet at least in the short term, President Hernandez's fall would likely undermine the efforts of the government to combat organized crime and insecurity, including the loss of the lessons learned from the innovations achieved. Still, the degree of the negative impact would depend on the degree of political chaos generated in the country by his ouster, and the orientation of the government that followed.

Beyond the future of the Hernandez administration, the greatest challenge for the country in combating transnational organized crime and other sources of insecurity over the medium term is, arguably, corruption.

In addition to the previously mentioned accusations against President Hernandez, the exposure of narco-politicians, such as Jose "Chepe" Handal, provides a glimpse into the extent of the problem; as does the assassination of politician Juan Gomez in January 2015, which reportedly so frightened the leaders of the *Cachiros* that they fled to the Bahamas the next day to turn themselves in to U.S. authorities, rather than face the Honduran justice system.<sup>94</sup> Similarly, the U.S. extradition request against former Honduran Vice-President and head of the Continental Group, Jaime Rosenthal,<sup>95</sup> illustrates how deeply corruption and criminality has infected all parts of Honduran politics and the economy.

On the other hand, corruption at the highest levels of the Honduran political system is not necessarily centralized in one interested group. Corruption at these levels permits innovative or courageous politi-

cians to combat organized crime in select areas, while, by design or otherwise, leaving other interests untouched.

Below the level of political elites, such corruption within the police force also creates particularly difficult obstacles in combating organized crime and insecurity. The police must interact with the population on an ongoing basis, while its adversaries have enormous resources to bribe officials and put them and their families at risk. Such corruption directly impedes the ability of law enforcement and other government organizations to combat criminals and undermines their confidence in working together and sharing information, thus destroying the effectiveness of the organization from the inside.

### **Police Reform.**

The elimination of corrupt elements from the national police and its reform as an institution, have gone very slowly. Although a significant number of polygraphs and other confidence testing has been performed, few of the policemen who have failed the confidence tests, and even fewer senior level police officials, have been removed.

The effectiveness of police reform has been limited by three factors:

1. it began from the bottom up, not the top down, leaving in place the senior leadership, which is arguably a major part of the problem;
2. the process lacks the transparency to generate confidence among a public already deeply skeptical about both political and police corruption; and,
3. the replacement of corrupt police is impeded by legal and administrative obstacles.

Within the current system, the internal investigative arm of the national police, DICEP (*Dirección de Investigación y Evaluación de la Carrera Policial*), can recommend dismissing police officers, but does not actually have the authority to fire them.

Further complicating dismissing police officers suspected of involvement in corruption is a culture in which Honduran judges regard polygraph tests as an insufficient basis for firing officers.

In part, Honduran experts interviewed for this analysis suggest that one problem slowing the purging of corrupt officials from the Honduran police is the Organic Law, which defines the police organization, and which makes it very difficult to fire officers without a lengthy set of procedures and extensive proof of wrongdoing. Although changes were made to this law in 2012, those consulted for this monograph did not regard the modifications as sufficient to make a difference.

Even if the Organic Law could be sufficiently modified or replaced, those consulted for this monograph suggested that the extent of corruption uncovered within the police has exceeded what those initiating the reforms initially expected,<sup>96</sup> making it difficult to fire all of the contaminated police without destroying the national police as an institution, creating an even greater problem of public order.

### **Potential Future PMOP Corruption.**

By contrast to the national police, corruption in the PMOP and other newly created security organizations has been limited. Nonetheless, the scandal of the \$1.3 million in cash stolen by members of the well-trained and carefully vetted police unit the *Tigres* illustrates



that confidence tests do not establish absolute guarantees of future behavior and highlight that publicly exposed incidents of corruption may damage the organization in ways that go far beyond the incident itself.

In the case of the PMOP, although the organization generally adopts a relatively distant posture from the community that it protects, and is subject to frequent rotations of personnel, its members are not invulnerable to corruption. PMOP units, for instance, coincidentally patrol in the same areas as regular police, setting the stage for the development of relationships between the two, and the transfer of certain improper behaviors or attitudes by the national police to their PMOP counterparts.

In less than two years of the existence of PMOP, according to officials from the organization, approximately 10% of the force have been dismissed for reasons related to failing confidence tests.<sup>97</sup> While such figures suggest that the system is effective in identifying and eliminating personnel at risk of being corrupted, it also illustrates that such risks exist despite the disciplined military culture from which PMOP members are drawn.

### **Institutional Rivalries.**

To a degree, the PMOP has generated discomfort both in the national police, which views the organization as a rival police force, as well as within the military, which supports it, but reportedly has reservations about how its planned separation from the armed forces (pursuant to a successful national referendum in 2017 to change the constitution) would affect the military as an institution.

More broadly, there are also other institutional rivalries, including competition for resources for investigation between the newly-created police investigative organization ATIC (the brainchild of Honduran Attorney General Oscar Fernandez Chinchilla), and the national counter-drug organization, DNIC. Indeed, such rivalries may have played a role in the dismissal of the head of DNIC, Isaac Santos, in December 2015.<sup>98</sup>

### **Intelligence.**

Despite an innovative structure and the considerable progress that FUSINA has achieved within two years of its formation, the organization reportedly lacks effective intelligence capabilities at multiple levels, and lacks the ability to integrate intelligence from the organizations that support it to produce complete, timely, actionable knowledge.

FUSINA's military police organization, the PMOP, even with the greatest presence on the ground, is not only new to police-style intelligence gathering and investigation, but maintains a relative distance from the local community to avoid corruption, which also impedes the collection of information from them. Although FUSINA interagency task forces at the departmental level generally contain regular police units, and although these police units are experienced in collecting intelligence from the local community, these police are often viewed by their military counterparts as unreliable, and their intelligence thus suspect. In addition, persons interviewed for this monograph spoke of concerns within the military that police units, bitter over the formation of the PMOP as an affront to their own competence, may not completely share

intelligence with the organization, potentially prejudicing FUSINA performance.

Beyond the PMOP, FUSINA is also hampered in its intelligence capabilities by its dependence on multiple outside sources for its intelligence, including: data obtained via national technical means from the recently formed DNII, which is still in its infancy (created in 2013); as well as intelligence from the PMOP, police units, and investigative organizations such as the DNIC. In addition to being new, the fact that these organizations report to different ministries, plus have concerns about corruption in the other entities with which they are working, augments their tendency to protect their own intelligence and sources, creating “stovepipes.”

### **Criminal Investigation Capability.**

Parallel to the problem with intelligence, Honduras currently has numerous organizations that perform law enforcement investigation and intelligence, including, but not limited to, the previously mentioned organizations PMOP, ATIC, DNIC, and DNII. The result is that each has access to only a piece of relevant knowledge on the criminal activities that they are pursuing. Consequently, they lack the ability to pool resources to meet specific needs, they may engage in redundant efforts, and there is an uneven level of quality.

### **FUSINA Interagency Coordination.**

Although FUSINA is an innovative design reflecting the incorporation of much thought and operational experience of its creators, the institutional compromises required to bring it to fruition may well generate

problems that hamper it as an organization. To accommodate both police and military organizational equities, for example, each FUSINA departmental interagency task force has a dual command structure, represented by both a military and a police official. While the arrangement avoids placing police officers under the direct operational control of a military officer, or vice-versa, it complicates accountability, and creates ambiguity regarding the chain of command.

In practice such issues are generally worked out without difficulty on an interpersonal basis between the military and police commanders in charge, with the military head of the task force taking orders directly from the military officer who heads FUSINA, while the police commander of the task force receives his orders from the deputy commander of FUSINA, who is a member of the police. This arrangement reportedly works so long as there is no significant disagreement about the operation between either the police or military leader at the task force level, or between the head of FUSINA and his police deputy commander.

While police officers are not generally put directly under military officers, it has occurred at least once at the departmental level: in Olancho, where three *Tigres* (national police) units were put under control of the local military officer due to the complete removal of the police in the zone because of corruption charges. Although the arrangement was made to function, knowledgeable persons interviewed for this monograph acknowledged that it generated some tension.

### **FUSINA Administrative Challenges.**

As with any new organization, a number of operational difficulties have emerged within the FUSINA structure that have caused tension and are still being worked out. For example, regular (non-PMOP) mili-

tary officers within the FUSINA structure do not receive additional pay or compensation for incidental expenses while deployed to locations far from their permanent home and family. According to persons consulted for this monograph, the workload of local FUSINA commanders can be onerous by comparison to that of regular military officers because they are double-hatted; having responsibilities for the military unit that they are head of as well as for the interagency coordination of the FUSINA task force that they command, each of which can be a full-time responsibility.

Finally, the frequent rotation of personnel assigned to FUSINA, in an attempt to avoid the corruption of units from their prolonged exposure to the persons of one area has also reportedly put a significant burden on the organization—particularly command staffs at the interagency task force (departmental) level.

### **Honduras-Guatemala Border Control.**

Currently, the vast majority of drugs entering Honduras through the Atlantic coast cross the Honduras-Guatemala border on their journey to the north. The border has traditionally been difficult to control due to the large number of *puntos ciegos* (informal border crossings), combined with persons owning adjoining properties on both sides of the border, facilitating passage from one side to the other. Control of the border is also compounded by the corruption of police and the historic absence of state presence.

The Honduran government has significantly expanded its activities in the area through the Maya-Chorti Task Force. It has sought to close many of the informal crossings, and has arguably employed the PMOP to lessen the effects of corruption. Yet, the

border continues to be challenged by the sheer volume of drugs moving through the area, and the constantly changing and innovative tactics used by narco-traffickers to cross.

A new free trade accord signed between Honduras and Guatemala in February 2015,<sup>99</sup> and in effect on December 15 of the same year,<sup>100</sup> is likely to increase the volume of legitimate trade crossing the border, creating more opportunities for narcotraffickers to conceal the flow of drugs and other illicit goods.

Compounding the difficulties in controlling the border traffic created by the free trade accord, the opening of an improved highway in August 2015 from Choluteca (where Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua converge in the Gulf of Fonseca) to Puerto Cortez in the north<sup>101</sup> may increase further illicit shipments crossing the country from south to north toward the border.

### **Money Laundering.**

Money laundering by transnational organized crime groups is a growing problem in Honduras. The Honduran economy is arguably less convenient for money laundering than neighboring El Salvador, which uses the U.S. dollar as its currency, or Panama, with its large infrastructure for international finance. Yet money laundering in Honduras, including both the remote east of the country as well as urban areas such as Tegucigalpa, Comayagüela, and San Pedro Sula, is reportedly increasing.<sup>102</sup>

In December 2014, acknowledging the problem, the Honduran government passed an important new anti-laundering law.<sup>103</sup> Perhaps the extent of the problem was highlighted most dramatically in October

2015 when the Honduran government shut down Continental Bank, the largest financial firm in the country,<sup>104</sup> based on charges by the U.S. Department of the Treasury that the bank was involved in laundering drug money for the *transportistas* (carriers) organization *Cachiros*.<sup>105</sup>

## **Human Rights.**

While the number of alleged human rights violations involving the Honduran military to date has been limited, the number of accusations have increased since the formation of the PMOP.<sup>106</sup> Its creation and role in fighting crime has given it high public visibility. The PMOP arguably has the greatest regular interaction with the population, although as noted previously, it is more limited than that of regular police units.

While the PMOP leadership appears to take its role seriously in both exerting controls and providing human rights training to its personnel, training courses are not always adequate to prevent bad actions by all personnel.

In addition, some consulted for this monograph argued that the possibility for improper treatment of the population is increased by the military character of the organization, fueling a disposition of some members to view the areas to which they are assigned as enemy territory filled with gang members, narcos, and other criminals, thus setting the stage for abuses to occur.

On the other side, it is to be expected that the criminal elements or others whose activities are impaired by the PMOP presence will be tempted to leverage the suspicion with which some members of Honduran

society view the organization<sup>107</sup> and file complaints or make statements to the media that discredit the organization to hamper its freedom of action.

### **Leadership by Civilian Institutions.**

While the innovative solutions adopted by the Hernandez administration are not necessarily undemocratic, for some they generate concern regarding the character of democracy in the country. A December 2014 report by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights expressed concern that through the law authorizing PMOP, the government was assigning to the military regular citizen security tasks that were not necessarily appropriate to the nature of the military as an institution.<sup>108</sup>

It is of note that the PMOP oath does not begin with words regarding their protection or service to the citizenry of Honduras, but with the words “I am a *military* professional...”

Although arguably necessary in the short term, the privileging of the military, via FUSINA and PMOP, as the principal tool for combating organized crime and insecurity in the country reflects a widespread belief among many in the military, the current government, and also in the population at large that civilian institutions have proven themselves incapable of providing the basic goods required by Honduras.<sup>109</sup>

Within this framework, the success of PMOP, in conjunction with the powers conferred upon its members, such as legal detention, arguably contributes to a pattern in which the military prefers to work with the organization, rather than with the civilian police or even elite forces, when conducting operations against criminal organizations, reinforcing the tendency to



exclude the national police from key citizen security functions.

Another troubling aspect of the FUSINA framework is the blurred line between the positive goal of interagency coordination and the integration of separate parts of the government in the name of efficiency, but in a manner that subtly undermines checks and balances between branches of government. This reduced delineation caused by the FUSINA framework can potentially impair the due process of law for those accused of wrongdoing. Although prosecutors and judges supporting FUSINA technically retain their independence from the military units with which they work, their co-location under the same military commander, and their close working relationship with and dependence on the military units to protect and sustain them, is a powerful if subtle inducement for those prosecutors and judges to identify with the perspective of those conducting the operation. Indeed, officials interviewed for this monograph, for example, characterized one benefit of FUSINA as allowing “all of the branches of government” to work together against the enemy.

It is also not clear, in practical terms, when and how law enforcement functions will be returned from the military to the police. As noted previously, although *Plan Morazán* established a timetable for the transition back to civilian control, in January 2016, which was supposed to have been the end of the “Domination” phase of the plan, despite notable improvements in public security, persisting challenges seemed to argue against moving to the “Consolidation” phase in which control is theoretically to be returned to civilian institutions. For example, the reform of deeply corrupted police institutions, whose dysfunctionality

has been widely cited as an important justification for the PMOP, is proceeding very slowly. Similarly, in a response to a public statement by U.S. Congressman Tim Kaine following his February 2015 visit to Honduras, President Hernandez affirmed that while the role of the military in Honduras would be slowly reduced as conditions permitted, there was no commitment to eliminate the PMOP.<sup>110</sup>

### **Relationship with the United States.**

While the United States-Honduran relationship was almost universally characterized as positive by Honduran officials and others interviewed for this monograph, the sometimes divergent priorities of the two countries generate friction. On the United States side, the Obama administration has sought to downplay the use of military tools in its engagement with the country. It has not substantially assisted or engaged with the PMOP as the core security initiative of the Hernandez administration. Nor has it supported the Hernandez administration's air shield initiative, possibly out of concern that an aircraft could be downed with innocent passengers aboard. In April 2014, after Honduras passed its new law authorizing aerial interceptions, the United States suspended the providing of radar data that might be used to support such intercepts.<sup>111</sup>

In the wake of the previously mentioned protests and allegations against the Hernandez administration during 2015, the United States has sought to strike a balance between supporting the government and acknowledging the opposition. For example, in the official 2015 Fourth of July celebration at the U.S. Embassy in Tegucigalpa, invitees from the Honduran government found the embassy compound decorat-

ed with unlit torches, the same type as those which became the national symbol for protest against the Hernandez administration. In July 2015, when the U.S. Senate approved funding for a Guatemalan-style foreign juridical organization to investigate serious crimes in the country,<sup>112</sup> Honduran protesters took their march against the Hernandez administration to the U.S. Embassy, where they were received by U.S. Ambassador James Nealon before marching on the Honduran Presidential Palace.<sup>113</sup>

While President Hernandez is widely characterized as a conservative, pro-U.S. businessman, he is more likely to turn away from the United States than is commonly recognized, if he is backed into a corner. President Hernandez comes from a difficult family background and has succeeded through his own determination, skill, and through the help of key family members, such as his brother Marco Agosto Hernandez, in rising first to the leadership of the Honduran Congress, and later to the Presidency, in a cutthroat political system. Honduran analysts consulted for this monograph argue that while President Hernandez recognizes the importance of the United States as an enabler of the prosperity of the nation (and to an extent, the success of his own security plan), he arguably does not identify with the more traditional Honduran elites, whom he sees as having bowed to the interests of the United States.

By contrast, President Hernandez reportedly enjoys a close personal relationship with Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa (who himself harbors deep personal animosity toward the United States), and Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega. Moreover, President Hernandez's political mentor and predecessor in the Presidential Palace, Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo Sosa, did his undergraduate studies in the revolutionary,

anti-U.S. Patrice Lumumba University in the former Soviet Union.

Such relationships and background do not make President Hernandez anti-U.S., but serve as a caution that, if pushed into a difficult political position by the United States, he could turn to a more anti-U.S. populist path.

### **Replacing the Criminal Economy.**

A growing concern is how the government's operations against transnational organized crime impacts the people employed by them. The three sources of employment most frequently mentioned in this regard were:

1. the payment of local persons (principally living in impoverished areas in the east of the country) for unloading shipments of narcotics from boats and aircraft, and in some cases, helping to transport it overland;
2. persons working in the estates of narcotraffickers or surrounding communities who were left without work and living spaces when those residences were seized; and,
3. legitimate businesses associated with the activities of persons and groups involved in criminality. The previously noted October 2015 government move against Banco Continental and its umbrella organization, Grupo Continental (the largest business organization in the country) highlights the potential of the anti-crime campaign to produce unemployment and hardship in the short term.<sup>114</sup>

Freezing or destruction of commercial activities in the course of going after criminal groups could have an unintended consequence: those losing work could turn to criminal activities themselves. While there has been talk of compensating those put out of work by the seizure of criminal businesses, such assistance has traditionally not been included as part of the government plan against transnational organized crime. Moreover, Honduran government organizations associated with economic and labor matters, which could help address the adverse side effects of the government's campaign against criminality, are not included within the national security cabinet, nor in the group of interagency players under the operational control of FUSINA.

### **Urban Culture of Gangs, Violence, and Poverty.**

The major urban areas of Honduras, particularly Tegucigalpa, Comayagüela, San Pedro Sula, and to some degree La Ceiba, have been impacted for more than a decade by not only poverty and inequality, but also by the culture of violent crime and gangs. Such culture has been reinforced by the sustained emigration of Hondurans seeking employment and better conditions in the United States and elsewhere, contributing to the absence of fathers, and in many cases mothers as well. While the PMOP is making progress in restoring government presence and a sense of security in some urban neighborhoods such as Flor de Campo (as noted previously), it must contend with the corrosive effects of a society with greatly weakened family structures and few economic opportunities, in which violence and crime has become the norm.

Most people interviewed for this monograph did not perceive social and economic development programs to be a significant portion of the interagency security plan of the Hernandez government; yet such programs need to be instituted at some point if the peace achieved through the PMOP in select areas of the country is to be sustainable.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICYMAKERS**

### **Adequate Level of U.S. Financial Support for Honduras.**

During the 6 years prior to the crisis spawned in Washington D.C. in 2014 by Central American child migrants, the United States spent a total of \$600 million on Central America as a whole; yet the Obama administration was forced to commit \$3.7 billion within a matter of weeks to deal with the refugee crisis. That crisis arguably contributed to the administration's request of \$1 billion in funding for the countries of the northern triangle in 2016, of which approximately \$750 million was approved by the U.S. Congress in December 2015.<sup>115</sup> In the coming years, it is imperative that the level of assistance to the region correspond to its strategic importance and the potential adverse impact on the United States if the economic and governance structures in the region were to degenerate.

Since U.S. support for Honduras should not focus exclusively or excessively on security matters, a security assistance component that corresponds to the relative needs and priorities of Honduras, as a U.S. partner, is a necessary part of a holistic package for a prosperous, stable, and democratic country.

## **Prudent Engagement on Military Police and Air Interdiction.**

While the United States prefers Honduras to pursue an approach to organized crime that is less reliant on the military, the U.S. attempts to avoid supporting Honduras in important areas of its programs against organized crime, such as the PMOP and aerial interdiction, could undercut the success of Honduras' security efforts, while also damaging the United States-Honduras relationship. This lack of support could also undercut the ability to improve the degree to which such programs are done with maximum respect for citizen rights and civilian safety.

Concerns over excessive militarization of law enforcement, or possible human rights abuses by the newly formed PMOP force, should be addressed by supporting the force in a manner that offers constructive recommendations and technical or educational support for avoiding problems.

Similarly, with respect to air interdiction, the United States should provide support, where possible, in the domain of radar data, intelligence, and perhaps even support for Honduras' aging F-5 interceptor aircraft, in conjunction with working with Honduras on protocols and training to avoid shooting down an innocent aircraft. While not supporting activities related to Honduras' air interdiction program may help the United States to keep its hands clean, active U.S. engagement with Honduras in this area may be the best way to avoid the loss of innocent lives.

## **Focus on Technology, Intelligence, and Training Support.**

Honduran experts consulted for this monograph emphasized that the items most desired from the United States in terms of assistance for Honduras' security program include: police and security technology, technical intelligence support, and training in a range of police and counter-organized crime matters.

Options for U.S. support that reflect both Honduran needs and U.S. sources of comparative advantage include providing national technical means of intelligence support to supplement the abilities of Honduras' new national intelligence organization, the DNII. Other options include: law enforcement and investigative technical training to the PMOP; real time intelligence coordination for Honduras' air and land shield operations, as well as its maritime efforts; technology to support Honduran anti-money laundering and financial crimes efforts; sensors to augment control of the Guatemala border; and intelligence and special operations training to support campaigns against the leadership of both narcotrafficking organizations and *maras*.

With respect to communications, Hondurans with experience in patrolling the remote eastern area of the country mentioned the need for radios permitting coordination between air, ground, and maritime assets, as well as more and better night vision goggles.

## **Look for Innovative Material Solutions.**

With respect to material support, Honduran experts consulted for this monograph mentioned unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) as a capability that



could save money and manpower spent on naval and aircraft patrols in remote areas like La Mosquitia, as well as helping them to position manned patrol and intercept assets more effectively. They also mentioned the need for a greater number of shallow-bottomed craft for riverine patrols and intercept; perhaps to include fan-powered swamp boats like those used to navigate the everglades in the United States.

### **Strengthen Institutional Ties in Professional Military Education.**

To build confidence in the United States-Honduras institutional relationship, and to strengthen institutional capability in Honduras in support of its security program, the United States should expand scholarships for Hondurans to attend courses in U.S. Security and Defense institutions, such as the Western Hemisphere Institute for National Security Center (WHINSEC), the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, and the U.S. Army War College.

In addition to constructing capabilities to combat narcotrafficking and organized crime, and strengthening relationships of confidence with the United States, the use of Latin America-oriented schoolhouses, like WHINSEC, also facilitates bonds between Honduran officers and those from other nations of the region, such as Guatemala. Persons interviewed for this monograph highlighted such ties forged in institutions, such as WHINSEC, as facilitating operational and intelligence cooperation on the borders and in shared maritime domains that narcotraffickers seek to cross.

## **Expand U.S. Coast Guard Ties with the Honduran Navy.**

Within the framework of providing more effective support to the Honduran maritime shield, the United States should explore ways to strengthen education, training ties, and personnel exchanges between the Honduran Navy and the U.S. Coast Guard, given that the Coast Guard is well matched to the capabilities and mission set of the Honduran Navy, and already has ample experience in engaging with it on maritime security matters.<sup>116</sup> In an interview with Honduran naval personnel, greater interactions with the U.S. Coast Guard were uniquely singled out as an item that could benefit the Honduran Navy.

## **Work Where Possible with the Inter-American System.**

As illustrated in this monograph, narcotrafficking, gangs, and other transnational crime phenomena are problems with sources and effects that go far beyond Honduras' borders. The nation has nine distinct maritime borders (two in the Pacific and seven in the Caribbean); these borders, and unresolved differences over them, are exploited by narcotraffickers in moving drugs through the region. On the other hand, as noted in the monograph, Honduras' neighbors, particularly Nicaragua and Colombia, are some of its most important sources of intelligence, and are key to operational coordination in addressing the challenge.

While the importance of a multinational approach to the challenge of organized crime in Honduras is evident, the question of which multinational approach is also important. Honduran officials interviewed for

this monograph noted how institutions of the Inter-American system, such as the Conference of Central American Armed Forces (CFAC), and the Inter-American Defense College have helped in facilitating contacts and fluid coordination between nations.

The Inter-American system is particularly relevant in addressing Honduras' challenges because it contains existing structures relevant to both the security and developmental dimensions, while at the same time including the United States, which is a key actor with respect to both the destination for narcotics and persons transiting Honduras, as well for intelligence, interdiction, developmental support, and other aspects of the solution.

### **Leverage the Central America-Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement for Economic Support.**

As previously mentioned, the Hernandez security concept needs a strong development component to succeed. This would replace the money taken out of the criminal economy by successful government actions against the narcotraffickers, create meaningful development in urban areas to build alternatives to desperation, and (with time) chip away at the culture of violence and criminality in the country. In the context of such development needs, the United States has an important vehicle in place for expanded trade and investment in Honduras in the form of the Central America-Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR). Within this framework, the U.S. Department of Commerce should work more closely with the Hernandez administration to promote expanded U.S. investment in, and trade with, Honduras; thereby leveraging the tax and other advantages accruing to

businesses investing in Honduras and producing (at least in part) for the U.S. market under CAFTA-DR, and taking advantage of the relative proximity of Honduras to the United States. Simultaneously, the United States and its Honduran counterparts must work to eliminate impediments to such investments, including concerns by U.S. and other multinational companies regarding security, investment protection, infrastructure, and labor issues.

## CONCLUSION

Honduras is at a pivotal moment with respect to its struggle against the transnational crime and insecurity that have torn the nation and its neighbors apart during the last decade. The crisis of 60,000 unaccompanied migrant children from Central America during the summer of 2014 illustrates that the United States is connected to what happens in the country through ties of geography, economic relations, and family; thus, the United States has an important stake in the country's success in resolving the challenges that currently confront it.

The current Honduran approach to addressing these security challenges is creative, intelligent, and pragmatic, if imperfect, and it is producing positive results. The success of the security plan of the Hernandez administration is important not only to the future of the country and the region, but also to the United States.

If the concept of the United States managing its relations with Latin America and the Caribbean through a framework of mutual respect is to have any meaning, the United States must have the political courage to help its partners in the way that they want to be helped, taking the risk that mistakes may be made along the way that may not paint the United States in a positive light, but doing everything possible to make sure that those efforts succeed.

For Honduras, Latin America, and for the Caribbean more broadly, the willingness to take such risks is the essence of the friendship and the posture of respect valued throughout the region.

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46. Nonetheless, the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff reportedly exercises a significant operational role in the organization, with and through its operational head, beyond the orders, which may come down in his name.

47. Indeed, FUSINA’s own mission statement places its activities “in the framework of Operation MORAZÁN.”

48. This operation, conducted in February 2013, was focused on San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa.

49. Nonetheless, as of January 2016, the government had not made any public statement regarding the shift from the “Domination” phase to the “Consolidation” phase of *Plan Morazán*.

50. Honduran officials consulted for this monograph estimated that 75% of Honduran naval assets or more could be rapidly assigned to FUSINA if needed for an operation.

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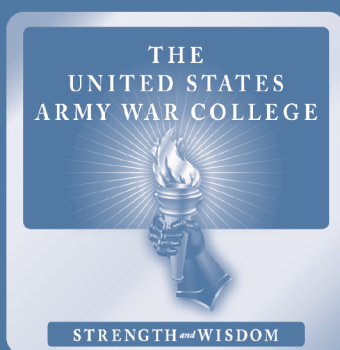
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